

How To Be More Jewish

There has been a lot of Jewish content in our culture this year. Some of it serious, like *Parade's* run on Broadway. Some of it, so painfully true it's funny, like, "You Are So Not Invited to my Bat Mitzvah". But, believe it or not, it was a reality show that made me think the most: "Jewish Matchmaking" on Netflix. A show in which our hero, Aliza Ben Shalom, serves as a modern Yenta for Jews across the United States and Israel. She jetsets from LA, to Miami, to Wyoming, Tel Aviv and Kansas, meeting single Jews looking for love. The first question she asks each client? "Tell me about your Jewish background."

The majority begin by talking about family. Shabbat dinners when they're all together, grandparents and parents who imparted Jewish values and traditions, major holidays, whether at home or once a year at a synagogue. Then, with only a couple of exceptions, they all talk about what they do not do.

"I would say I'm less Jewish."

"I believe in God, but I'm not a practicing Jew".

"I'm not religious, I'm culturally Jewish."

"I don't read Hebrew so I don't understand prayer and find it boring."

"It's not about religion, but I'm spiritual."

Perhaps this focus on *not doing* comes from our emphasis on Judaism as a religion of action and doing.

I ask kids and adults in our community on a near-daily basis about their connections to Judaism. Most of my students talk about learning Torah stories, Hebrew and prayers. And most adults will talk about feeling disconnected from exactly these same things.

I find that often, the way we think about Judaism is as a list of things we think we should do, but don't. And what are the things that we think we should do? *Mitzvot*, commandments, of which there are 613. 613--essentially Jewish practices that connect us with our ancestors, our community and with God. And praying and learning are only two of them. But do we have to do *all* 613 of them to live authentic Jewish lives? Considering that we have chosen to be part of a reform Jewish community, surely the answer is "no". But then what of the 613? Certainly, there is no better time than Kol Nidrei, the start of *Ha-Yom ha-Din*--the Day of Judgement to consider which *mitzvot*--which Jewish actions--we ought to recommit ourselves to pursuing. And fortunately, the ancient sages of the Talmud had this same thought 1500 years ago.

“Rabbi Simlai taught: There were 613 mitzvot stated to Moses in the Torah...[and] King David came and established the 613 mitzvot upon eleven...”¹

So right away here, Rabbi Simlai takes us from 613 mitzvot to just 11. 11 practices that are essentially Jewish. And by pointing us in the direction of King David, Rabbi Simlai provides ancient proof for his assertion. King David lived 1500 years before Rabbi Simlai, so surely he knew how to live an authentic Jewish life. And here are King David’s 11 actions that bring us closer to God:

God...Who shall dwell upon Your sacred mountain? (1) The one who walks wholeheartedly, and (2) works righteousness, and (3) speaks truth in their heart. (4) Who has no slander upon their tongue, (5) nor does evil to their neighbor, (6) nor takes up reproach against their relative. (7) In whose eyes a vile person is despised, and (8) who honors those who fear the Eternal; (9) One who takes an oath to their own detriment, and changes not. (10) One who neither gives their money with interest, (11) nor takes a bribe against the innocent...The one who performs these [practices] shall never be moved.”²

Rabbi Simlai lists off these 11 mitzvot and, the sages listening, like many of our b’nai mitzvah students looking at the list of ideas for their mitzvah project, respond, “Hold on, hold on, I need to do *everything* on this list?” No no, the sages

¹ Makkot 23b-24a

² Psalm 15

agree, when the last line says “the one who performs these [practices]” it doesn’t mean “*only* the one who [does] *all* 11 of these,” but rather, “a person who does any, even one [of the 11]” has a place [on God’s holy mountain,] the World to Come.

So perhaps reading the room a bit better this time, Rabbi Simlai continues to attempt to distill the 613 mitzvot. He cites Isaiah who narrowed them down to just six. Six is still too many? Ok. Let’s cut that in half. Rabbi Simlai goes on:

“....Micah came and established the 613 mitzvot upon three, as it is written: It has been told to you...what God does require of you; only to (1) do justly, (2) to love mercy, (3) and walk humbly with your God.³” If we take a closer look, these aren’t just suggestions for virtues that we ought to cultivate within ourselves. Our ancestors really thought about the day-to-day actions by which we walk in God’s ways. How do we “do justly, love mercy and walk humbly?”

If someone you cared about died this year, if you attended a funeral, if you visited someone during shiva, if you sent a note to someone grieving this year, nod your head. If you know someone who got engaged or married, if you attended a wedding, wrote a note of congratulations or celebrated a marriage in any way this year, say “I did”. If you went to the grocery store and texted a friend

³ Micah 6:8

to see if they needed anything, rounded up your bill, volunteered to prepare, serve or deliver a hot meal, took home a bag from our lobby (or you can take one home tonight, it's not too late!) or made a donation of any kind to help all of our neighbors know the dignity of a hot meal, a stocked refrigerator or pantry, raise your hand. Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly, our sages explained, is all about seeing the actions you think of as common courtesies, or "just being a good person", as deeply, authentically Jewish.

Sure, there is always more to learn. There are volumes and volumes of Jewish text which we study here every Shabbat morning, every Saturday at 9am, and if you want to feel more comfortable participating in prayer, come to services and come learn with your clergy on Sunday Mornings at 9:15 in our Foundations of Judaism: Prayer class. Learning is part of being Jewish, Torah and prayer are important, but just as important, is understanding that our ancestors, those rabbis of old that we cite so often, were, as much as you and me, trying to feel connected to God and Jewish tradition, trying to live deep, meaningful, authentic, Jewish lives. And we do this every day, not just in this room and not just on shabbat or on holidays. Our actions, the things we do, are only part of what it means to live Jewishly. Understanding everything we do through a Jewish lens, *that* is the other essential component.

Each year, Yom Kippur challenges us to do exactly this. Not just to look back and consider where I went wrong and how I could do better as a generally good person next time. But to consider: how do I behave on a daily basis because I am living a Jewish life? How can seeing *everything* I do as part of being Jewish, help me to do better?

Back to Rabbi Simlai and his attempt to narrow all 613 mitzvot down to just the most important few. He doesn't stop at Micha's three. He narrows all 613 commandments down to just one. He concludes:

“Amos came and established the 613 mitzvot upon one, as it is stated: So says the Eternal One to the house of Israel: *Dirshuni vich'yu*--Seek Me and live⁴”

Dirshuni comes from the root daled-resh-shin. It's the same root in the word midrash, and it means “to look deeper.” This is an essential Jewish action. Looking deeper, Seeking--this implies that being Jewish isn't about *knowing* Torah, Hebrew or prayers, it's not about what traditions or customs we do or don't keep. *Dirshuni vich'yu*--it's all about how we seek to understand everything we do. Everyday, as we live our lives rooted in Judaism. And, it isn't just Rabbi Simlai, but actually the Torah itself, that teaches us this same lesson.

⁴ Amos 5:4

If you unroll a Torah scroll and you count the words starting from the beginning and the end, you will meet in the middle, at the halfway point of the Torah at the words: *Darosh darash*⁵--there's that root again--*Daled-resh-shin*--meaning, you shall surely seek. *Darosh darash, dirshuni vi'hiyu*--you shall surely seek, seek Me and live.

I almost stopped watching during the first episode when I heard one of Aliza's clients describe herself as "less Jewish". But Aliza's quick interjection gave me so much hope. "There are 15 million Jews in the world," she said, "and there are 15 million ways to be Jewish. There's no such thing as 'less Jewish'."

We talk about Judaism as a religion of doing and in this, the season of *teshuvah*, of thinking, reflecting and reconnecting, we are reminded that "doing" is only part of living Jewishly. **Looking deeper, seeking** to see Judaism reflected in our every action, more than anything, is the essence of living a Jewish life. *Darosh darash, dirshuni vi'hiyu*. What makes anything we do a *mitzvah*, an act of service to God, a ticket to the World to Come, is understanding that that's what they are.

On this Day of Judgment, let's stop judging ourselves as "less Jewish". Let's stop seeing Judaism as a list of should's but don't's. Let's make 5784 a year of being "more Jewish." Let's **seek** to see the choices we make, the kindness we

⁵ Deena Weiss, "Your Better Half", *Ta Shma*.

extend, the justice we pursue, the mercy we show as manifestations of the 15 million ways we Jews make our lives holier because we are Jewish. *G'mar hatima tovah. Darosh darash, dirshuni vi'hiyu.* Seek deeper, for in seeking, we find life.